

Self care fact sheet – Cough & colds



A cold on its own can be treated without seeing a GP. You should begin to feel better in about 1 to 2 weeks. A cough will usually clear up on its own within 3 to 4 weeks. Cough and colds can be treated with over the counter preparations from a pharmacy or other retail outlets.

How can I prevent and treat cough & colds?

- To reduce the risk of spreading a cold; wash your hands often with warm water and soap, use tissues when you cough or sneeze and bin them once used as quickly as possible
- Rest and drink plenty of fluids
- Gargle with salty water (do not swallow) and steam inhalation
- Coughs will usually resolve within 3 weeks and colds within 2 weeks
- A pharmacist can recommend over the counter treatments for cough and colds.
- Ensure you have a flu vaccine if you are in an 'at risk category' as it prevents you from catching the flu but not colds
- Antibiotics are not routinely needed for coughs and colds because they won't relieve your symptoms or speed up recovery.
- Antibiotics are only effective against bacterial infections, and colds are caused by viruses

When shall I seek medical help?

- Cough or symptoms that last more than 3 weeks
- Bad cough that rapidly gets worse – e.g. you have a hacking cough or cannot stop coughing
- Increased temperature or feeling hot and shivering
- Difficulty breathe or develop chest pain
- Unintentional weight loss
- Side of your neck feels swollen and painful (swollen glands)
- A weakened immune system – e.g. because of chemotherapy or diabetes
- Feeling unwell/worsening symptoms and that are concerning you
- If you have a long-term medical condition e.g (insert example)
- **See a GP urgently if you're coughing up blood**

